

More refugees drown trying to reach Australia

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22 June 2010

The Rudd government's increasingly draconian "border protection" measures, designed to stop refugees fleeing to Australia, directly contributed to the deaths of up to 12 more asylum seekers earlier this month. As many as 170 people are now thought to have died trying to reach the country since the Labor government took office in 2007.

The latest victims were Sri Lankans and Afghans who drowned on June 7 when their small boat overturned in storms off the Indonesian island of Batam as it tried to rendezvous with a larger craft bound for Australia.

Two of the dead, as well as the only two surviving refugees, were from the Jaya Lestari, a wooden vessel towed by Indonesian forces to the Javan port of Merak last year at the request of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The two drowned men were 24-year-old steel fitter W. Bahirathan and 27-year-old Thileepkumar, both of whom had already been stranded for three years in Malaysia despite being accorded refugee status by the UN.

Rudd asked Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to intercept the Jaya Lestari and detain its 254 Sri Lankan Tamil passengers in a bid to deter refugees sailing to Australia, despite their right to flee persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Rudd subsequently refused entry to any of the Tamils, even after many of them conducted a six-month sit-in aboard the boat at Merak.

Since April, Rudd's government has stepped up its punitive measures against refugees, including the suspension of all asylum applications from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan for at least three and six months respectively. Many of those affected by the freeze are now being transferred from the over-full detention facility on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean, to isolated camps in western and northern Australia.

The government has also introduced jail terms of up to

20 years for refugee boat crew members, who have been branded "people smugglers," and up to 10 years for anyone in Australia, including family members, assisting refugees to set sail. In the May budget, the government allocated \$1.2 billion to purchase eight new patrol boats to intercept asylum seekers. As the latest fatalities illustrate, these measures will increase the likelihood of further tragedies.

Earlier this month, media reports surfaced that 100 refugees are feared to have drowned last October. On October 2, a boat carrying about 100 people left an Indonesian port, bound for Australia, but has not been sighted since, according to the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service. Relatives of those on board said it must have sunk, because they have heard nothing from the missing.

The death toll under Labor is mounting. In January last year, at least nine people drowned off the Indonesian island of Rote as they tried to sail to Ashmore Reef, a rocky outcrop about 400 km off the north-western Australian coast. Indonesian police said the dead included a nine-year-old boy. Three months later, another nine died, in the South China Sea. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Authority said the lone survivor was 14-year-old Aqeel Qirkeel.

Also in April 2009, five Afghan men died when their boat exploded after the Australian navy intercepted it near Ashmore Reef. A year later, a coronial inquest ruled that the men had died as the unintended result of a plan to cripple the boat when the 47 passengers were issued with a notice that made them immediately fearful of being turned back toward Indonesia.

In May 2009, 19 more died when an Indonesian boat taking them to Australia sank off Halang Island. Last November, 12 Sri Lankans drowned off the Cocos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, when their boat sank. Last month, another five died near the Cocos Islands after their

boat ran out of fuel, food and drinking water.

These are only the known disasters. Earlier this month, Mohammed Taqi, an Afghan in Indonesia, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "The 7.30 Report" that three people died when his own boat foundered off Kupang. He added: "I know lots of my friends have died in the sea."

The Rudd government's response has been to exploit the fatalities like the previous Howard government, which seized upon the drowning of 353 people from a stricken boat, later dubbed the SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vehicle X, or unknown), in October 2001 to broadcast the hope that the catastrophe would "stop the boats". Many unanswered questions remain about how the SIEV X sank in area under close Australian military surveillance (see: "Five years since Australia's SIEV X tragedy: the official cover-up continues").

Just before the latest disaster, the Rudd government released immigration department video advertisements on YouTube designed to discourage asylum seekers, including one featuring a drowning person. A spokeswoman for Home Affairs Minister Brendan O'Connor said: "Any loss of life as a result of people-smuggling is very sad and is a warning to all those who might contemplate such a dangerous journey."

As part of its "Indonesian solution" to stop refugee boats, the government is funding detention centres in Indonesia, where conditions are deteriorating. Detainees at the Tanjung Pinang centre, on Bintan Island just south of Singapore, went on hunger strike last week, alleging that Indonesian guards had used stun guns and threatened to kill them. Among the detainees are some of the 122 Jaya Lestari refugees who remain in Indonesian custody.

Australian immigration minister Chris Evans said his staff would make inquiries, but wiped his hands of any responsibility. "We do encourage them [the Indonesian authorities] to set higher standards in the management of those centres, but it is at the end of the day their responsibility," he said.

On the Australian mainland, the government has reopened one of the previous Howard government's most inhumane camps, at the Curtin air base in north-western Australia, and has begun to shift refugees, including children, into disused mining camps at Leonora in Western Australia and Dalby in Queensland. Another horror of the Howard government has returned—remote detention camps where despairing people are held indefinitely.

Despite Labor's election promises to end the detention

of children, there are now more children detained than there were in the dying days of the Howard government. As of May 21, there were 3,612 asylum seekers in detention, including 452 children.

This week, the Rudd government claimed an initial "success" for its tougher regime—a near 25 percent drop in boat arrivals since it imposed the freeze on Sri Lankan and Afghan refugees. Evans also boasted of an increased rejection rate for refugee visa applications, saying some 40 percent of Afghans were now being turned down and faced deportation.

The government ludicrously claims that conditions are improving in Afghanistan, where the US-led war is intensifying, and Sri Lanka, where Tamils continue to flee persecution in the wake of the Rajapakse government's military victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year. In both countries, the Labor government bears direct responsibility for the oppression. It has troops in Afghanistan, backing the US occupation of the country, and it is collaborating with the Sri Lankan government to block refugee boats, after tacitly backing the assault on the LTTE.

Domestically, the Rudd government is competing with the Liberal opposition to vilify asylum seekers as "illegals" and prevent their entry. Late last month, immigration minister Evans criticised the Liberal Party's decision to return to a "Pacific solution" of transporting asylum seekers to remote Pacific islands, and to restore Temporary Protection Visas, which deny security and family reunion rights to officially-accepted refugees. Evans' criticism was that these policies had failed to "stop the boats". Both parties are seeking to whip up anti-immigrant chauvinism to divert growing public discontent over unemployment and deteriorating living standards for which successive Labor and Liberal-led governments are responsible.



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